The

THOREAU SOCIETY

BULLETIN

The Thoreau Society, Inc., is an informal gathering of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. Walter Harding, State University College, Geneseo, New York, president, secretary and treasurer; Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, Concord, Mass., vice-president. Membership $2.00 a year; life membership $25.00.

BULLETIN EIGHTY-SIX WINTER, 1964

THOREAU AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT, by Ruth Robinson Wheeler . . .

[The following article was published in the CONCORD JOURNAL for December 26, 1963. Unfortunately we did not have room to include all the signatures, but those of Thoreau and his family are marked with arrows below.]

There turned up in Concord the other day a rolled-up document about eight inches wide, but two and a half yards long, full of the signatures of prominent Concordians of the nineteenth century and marked "Protest of 400 inhabitants of Concord to the hanging of Washington Goode." When and why it was signed was a real mystery. There was no date on it, but a newspaper clipping pasted at the head of the scroll said the intended execution was "a crime in which we would under no circumstances participate, which we would prevent if possible and in the guilt of which we will not by the seeming assent of silence, suffer outselves to be implicated."

There is a line here which is interesting in the light of present-day talk about the guilt of us all in the President's assassination. Does silence implicate? Is there a duty to go on record against every and any injustice?

To find out what this old protest was all about was a real detective problem. To fix the date, we examined the signatures. It was signed by Ellen Emerson who was born in 1839 and by her grandmother, who died in 1853. Captain Nehemiah Flint, who signed it, died in 1849 as did Helen Thoreau. So even allowing for Ellen Emerson's precocity, it must have been signed in the latter part of the eighteen-forties.

None of the reference books or dictionaries of biography mentions Washington Goode nor does any of the anti-slavery histories. Probably our first thought that it was an anti-slavery document was wrong. Not to be discouraged, Mrs. Moss, our Concord reference librarian, asked the Harvard Law School librarian about him and soon on inter-library loan came a pamphlet about his trial and execution, for he was executed.

The trial of Washington Goode for the murder of Thomas Harding on June 28, 1848 began on Jan. 1, 1849. Both were colored seamen on the barque Nacoochee, both interested in a prostitute named Mary Ann Williams who roomed in a tough section of Boston near Ann and Richmond streets. Both men had been drinking heavily that night in June and had threatened each other. Harding died from a stab wound in the back, made as he left a grog shop, but his assailant was not seen by any witnesses, although one thought he saw Goode walking away from the scene of the crime and others testified to the threats. The prosecuting Attorney said that Harding had presented a handkerchief to Mrs. Williams and he quoted Othello in his opening speech.

When arrested Goode carried only a small penknife and there was no blood on his clothing. Still in a drunken stupor when arrested, that same night, he denied knowing Harding and this counted heavily against him. The jury was out only 35 minutes and brought in a verdict of guilty.

When the morning of the hanging came, Goode tried to commit suicide by cutting his wrist arteries with a piece of broken glass. Father Taylor prayed with him and guards carried him in a chair to the gallows because he was too weak to walk. The execution was by hanging in the jail yard and was supposed to be private but spectators lined every window and roof-tops which overlooked the yard. He did not confess.

Apparently the protest was against capital punishment, but there was talk about a conviction on the basis of circumstantial testimony by witnesses of low character. On June 1 Bronson Alcott mentions attending in Boston "Brisbane's meeting on Social Sin and Capital Punishment."

On May 25, Samuel Gridley Howe wrote a letter headed "Day of the Hanging" and said in it "I never before considered the question of Capital Punishment."

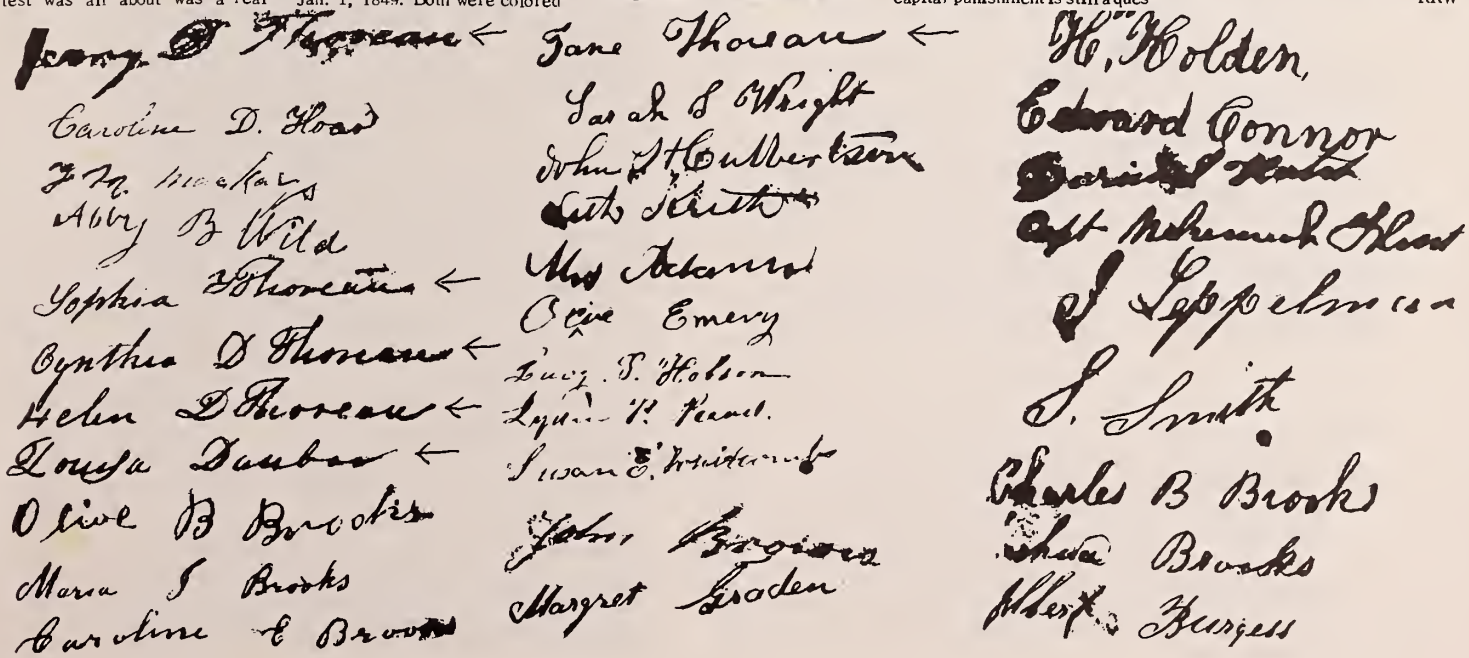
Here it is 115 years later and capital punishment is still a question but 400 inhabitants of Concord considered it in the early Spring of 1849.

Henry Thoreau's name is near the top. Did he take the paper around? It is not mentioned in his JOURNAL. On Wednesday Feb. 7, Alcott, then living in Boston, wrote "Henry Thoreau calls at my rooms and discusses men and times a while with me" and "went with him to hear Parker on the moral condition of Boston."

The first women signers were Elizabeth and Caroline Hoar, the list of men includes Judge Brooks and is a who's who of Concord in mid-century. It is still a mystery who carried it from Isaac Lee's at Nine Acre Corner to Minot Pratt's on Punkatasset Hill and from Joseph Barrett's to Ephraim Bull's.

The scroll is the gift to the Thoreau Society and may be seen at the Concord Free Public Library.

RRW



"Welcome to Walden Pond!"

Drawing by Lorenz. c 1962 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc. From the issue of June 9, 1962.

THE ANNUAL MEETING

The 1964 annual meeting of the Thoreau Society will be held in Concord, Massachusetts, on Saturday, July 11. Details of the meeting, including speakers, will be announced in the spring bulletin.

THOREAU IN THE WHITE HOUSE LIBRARY . . .

Thanks to the generosity of Mr. Leonard Kleinfeld of Forest Hills, L.I., a set of the 20 volume 1906 Walden Edition of Thoreau's writings, with half-leather bindings, gold edges, and gold stamping, has been donated to the White House Library in the name of the Thoreau Society. We are all deeply indebted to Mr. Kleinfeld for his magnificent gift.

The society is still looking for a copy of Joseph Wood Krutch's Henry David Thoreau (New York, 1948) and the Rollins edition of On the Duty of Civil Disobedience (New Haven, 1928) for presentation to the White House Library.

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Longstreth, T. Morris. HENRY THOREAU: AMERICAN REBEL New York: Dodd, Mead, 1963, 204pp., $3.50 A brief fictionalized biography of Thoreau for teen-agers. Mr. Longstreth (acting secretary of the Thoreau Society during World War II) catches the flavor of Thoreau's life, but often concocts imaginary conversations and incidents and occasionally transposes events quite out of their sequence--as for example, having Thoreau talking to Emerson years before Emerson moved to Concord.

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Williams, Paul O. "Walden Organized." Emerson Soc. Quart., XXXIII (1963), 49. A poem.

Wood, James Playsted. A HOUND, A BAY HORSE AND A TURTLE-DOVE. New York: Pantheon, 1963. 175pp. $3.75. A "life of Thoreau for the young reader," Wood's book tells briefly and succinctly the facts of Thoreau's life and then sums up some of his major ideas and their impact on the world since. Wood is obviously well acquainted and sympathetic with Thoreau's life. He makes a number of minor errors of fact, but none of them are particularly important. We are sorry however he devotes but a paragraph to Ellen Sewall and nothing at all to the fire on Fair Haven Bay. On the whole the book is engagingly written, but for a rugged portrayal of Thoreau's life, we still prefer August Derleth's CONCORD REBEL.

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Thoreau's "It is no dream of mine": A New Proposal by Paul O. Williams (Duke University)

There seems to be no satisfactory explication of Thoreau's "It is no dream of mine," a poem which appears in The Variorum Walden, ed. Walter Harding (New York, 1962) on p. 166. The first two verses, "It is no dream of mine / To ornament a line," seem to form no close relationship with the rest of the poem, which relates the speaker's identity to that of Walden Pond. Carl Bode, in his note to the poem on p. 341 of Collected Poems of Henry David Thoreau (Chicago, 1943), writes that the poem "restate/s/one of Thoreau's most basic beliefs. That is the conviction that the work, in this case, the poem, is of far less consequence than the poet's experience in living."

This interpretation takes verse two to be referring to a line of poetry or prose, but neither the context of the poem in Walden nor the poem itself refers to the contrast between writing and experience.

An alternate proposal, also a familiar Thoreau theme and one which seems much more integral with the rest of the poem, is to take the word "line" to mean "meridian." Then the poem

becomes a rejection of objective apprehension, visualizing the self as a thing located in a physical world as one of its objects, in favor of subjective apprehension, viewing the observable world as a function of the viewer's perceptions. This process gives justification for assuming that a closeness to God will arise from a closeness to a natural object, as verses three and four point out: "I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven / Than I live to Walden even."

The remaining six verses identify the speaker with various aspects of the pond:

I am its stony shore,
And the breeze that passes o'er;
In the hollow of my hand
Are its water and its sand,
And its deepest resort
Lies high in my thought.

This process of assimilation of the pond into the self points out that for him all there is to the pond exists in his perceiving mind. Accordingly, his close study of the pond allows him to "become" the pond by a fusion into his consciousness of all its (hence his own) qualities, by perceiving his correspondence to it and thereby coming "nearer to God and Heaven," by virtue of a knowledge of the world organically conceived which is a knowledge of the self as well. This oneness, rather than merely ornamenting a location in an external world, is his dream.

ARTHUR FIFIELD AND THOREAU'S (CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE)
by Albert E. Lownes

When it first was published, "Civil Disobedience" fell with a dull thud. Aesthetic Papers found few readers. It was "collected" in A Yankee in Canada and, later, in Anti-slavery and Reform Papers and in Miscellanies. Only an ardent Thoreauvian would pause before these titles. Few Englishmen would care about a Yankee in Canada; anti-slavery was a dead issue; there was no "pull" to miscellanies. "Civil Disobedience" might have died there, safely embalmed in hard covers. There was no hint of the explosive charge hidden inside. In 1900 Thoreau was a nature writer, a minor poet, a man who found a few readers for his philosophy of simple living.

But in London Arthur C. Fifield was attracting "progressive" (his word) readers with the publications of The Simple Life Press. These were, for the most part, inexpensive books and pamphlets that disseminated liberal ideas. Tolstoy was one of Fifield's heroes. He printed many of his shorter writings--particularly his political and religious works. Other Fifield titles include vegetarian, anti-vivisection, agricultural reform, and other idealistic or mildly radical tracts.

In 1903 Fifield published The Simple Life Series No. 4, "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience"--price, threepence. It was a modest pamphlet, pocket-sized ($6\frac{1}{2}$"x4"), at a low price. The title would attract inquiring and adventuresome readers who had never heard of Thoreau. I would hazard a guess that Fifield's pamphlet was the "somehow, somewhere" that introduced Thoreau to Tolstoy--and perhaps to Gandhi. Fifield gave "Civil Disobedience" an independent existence. Now it stood alone.

NOTES AND QUERIES . . . .

Part of the cost of printing and mailing this bulletin is covered by the life memberships of Miss Julia E. Damkoehler of Troy, New York, and Mr. Charles W. Farnsworth of Concord, Mass. Life memberships are $25.00.

I am indebted to H. Adel, A. Bell, C. Bode, T. Bailey, M. Campbell, D. Dean, R. Dickens, M. Flak, S. Harding, C. Hoagland, G. Haglund, D. Kamen-Kaye, A. Kovar, K. Hasegawa, H. Lambert, P. Meigs, R. Needham, W. Peterson, E. Phillips, M. Sherwood, R. Schaedle, W. Slavick and L. Tozer for information used in this bulletin. Please keep the secretary informed of new items of Thoreau interest and those he has missed.

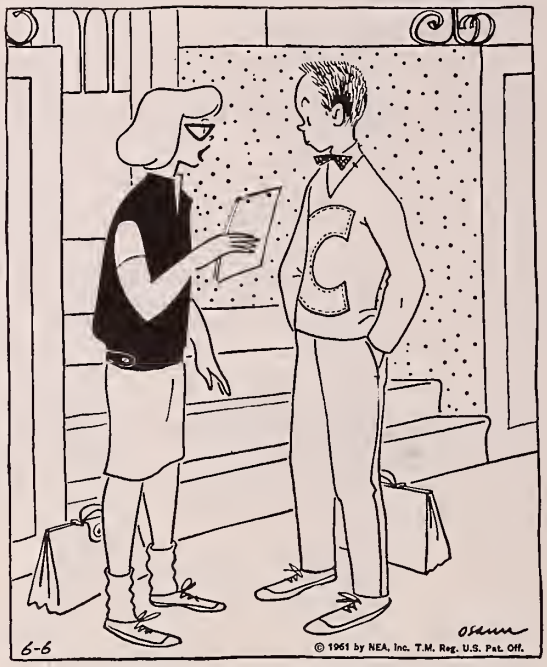
Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, as chairman of the Save Walden Committee, received the following letter, dated Dec. 6, 1963, from the Hon. John F. Dever, Jr., Chairman, Middlesex County Commissioners:

> Since the meeting Mr. Snelling had with Mr. Robbins and Miss Harrison at the Walden Pond site, the County Engineers have made a survey and taken sections on the present road. This field work has been plotted and new lines suggested, with the view of narrowing the road and filling in the slopes to correspond as nearly as possible to original contours.
>
> Costs for fill and top soil and shaping of slopes will be estimated on the basis of current prices. When the estimated figures have been completed, the amounts will be submitted in the Walden Pond Budget for 1964.
>
> Be assured that the work is proceeding, but due to the work load being carried by the Engineers at this time there will be some delay.

Mrs. Kamen-Kaye raises the question, What was the plum cake that Thoreau always took on his hikes? Does anyone know of a receipe for plum cake?

A new housing development in West Concord, Mass., is named "Thoreau Hills."

TIZZY By Kate Osann



"This isn't bad, but I don't think you can get away with calling Thoreau an 'outdoors nut'!"
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